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SUBJECT: BUILDING BRIDGES TO PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT IN ZAMBOANGA

1. Summary. During a July 7 visit to Zamboanga City, the Ambassador highlighted the depth and longevity of U.S. commitment to peace and prosperity in Mindanao. The Ambassador spoke at the inaugurations of three USG-sponsored projects, including a commercial wireless internet broadband (WiMax) service for the city, a Job Enabling English Proficiency project, and a neighborhood footbridge. The Ambassador also reached out through radio and television interviews, and stopped in for a visit at the local American Corner. Local residents enthusiastically welcomed the Ambassador, emphasizing their vision of Zamboanga at the center of a forward-leaning Mindanao. End Summary.

Background: Zamboanga City

2. Zamboanga City is a multicultural city in the Southern Philippines region of Mindanao, and is located at an important crossroads for regional trade and economic activity. It also faces peace and security challenges given its proximity to conflict-affected areas of Mindanao and Sulu. The U.S. has a range of development and security-related cooperation activities within Zamboanga City. U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines (JSOTF-P) is located at the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Western Mindanao Command in Zamboanga City, advising and assisting the AFP in a non-combat role.

USG Partnerships Lay Groundwork, Train Workers for Economic Development

3. Over the past several years, Zamboanga City has attempted to attract investments from the business process outsourcing firms that employ tens of thousands across the Philippine archipelago. A lack of sufficient information and communication technology infrastructure to ensure fast and uninterrupted internet connections has been a common concern of interested companies. In cooperation with Globe Telecom, the Ambassador launched a cutting-edge commercial internet service called WiMax that covers all of Zamboanga City and aims to benefit not only enterprise but also health and education sectors. Uniting the themes of peace and development, the Ambassador expressed sadness at the previous day's deadly bombing attacks in Cotabato City and called for a return of all sides to peace and reconciliation talks.

4. Building on new business, health, and education opportunities provided by commercial WiMax service, the Ambassador also launched USG-funded Job Enabling English Proficiency (JEEP) Projects at Western Mindanao State University (WMSU) and Zamboanga State College of Marine Science and Technology. The JEEP Project aims to improve the employability of graduates of Mindanao colleges and universities by expanding and enhancing English language training capabilities, with particular focus on business process outsourcing, nursing, and other job fields important to the Philippine economy. Of special significance to the several hundred students and faculty in attendance was the memorable detail that the USG provided funding for the 1915-era grand social hall at WMSU where the event was held.

Infrastructure Projects Bridge the Gap in Village Commerce and
Reconciliation

15. Under the Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM) Program, USAID has financed 26 infrastructure projects in Zamboanga and more than 900 across Mindanao and Sulu, with 1,000 more planned in the next four years. In leading the turnover of Tugbungan Footbridge to local government officials, the Ambassador demonstrated the importance of economic growth to sustainable peace, and the continuing commitment of both the Philippine and U.S. governments to the peace process.

A Legacy of Engagement

16. The residents of Zamboanga are not forgetful. In thanking the Ambassador for USG investment in the JEEP Project, the President of WMSU also recalled that much of the university infrastructure was constructed with USG assistance dating back generations before. Similarly, when the Ambassador paid a visit to the American Corner at Ateneo de Zamboanga University, she was directed to a plaque thanking the United States for its earlier 1987 investment for the larger library where the American Corner is housed. Just as the United States consistently encourages peace and development in Mindanao, the President of Ateneo said his greatest challenge in governing a university is not the education of students but rather the advancement of peace and order.

Media Outreach

17. The Ambassador's visit received extensive regional print and broadcast coverage, as well as national print media coverage. In addition to media asides at each event, the Ambassador also gave a live interview to Radio Mindanao and a recorded interview to a local television station. The Ambassador reached out to the diverse and talented population of Zamboanga, highlighting U.S. assistance in the region and encouraging a focus on peace and reconciliation as Mindanao searches for sustained economic prosperity and development. Thanking Zamboanguenos for welcoming her as an adopted daughter of the city, the Ambassador took the opportunity to reaffirm Zamboanga's importance as a regional trade center and a leading city of Mindanao.

KENNEY